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Singapore Management University

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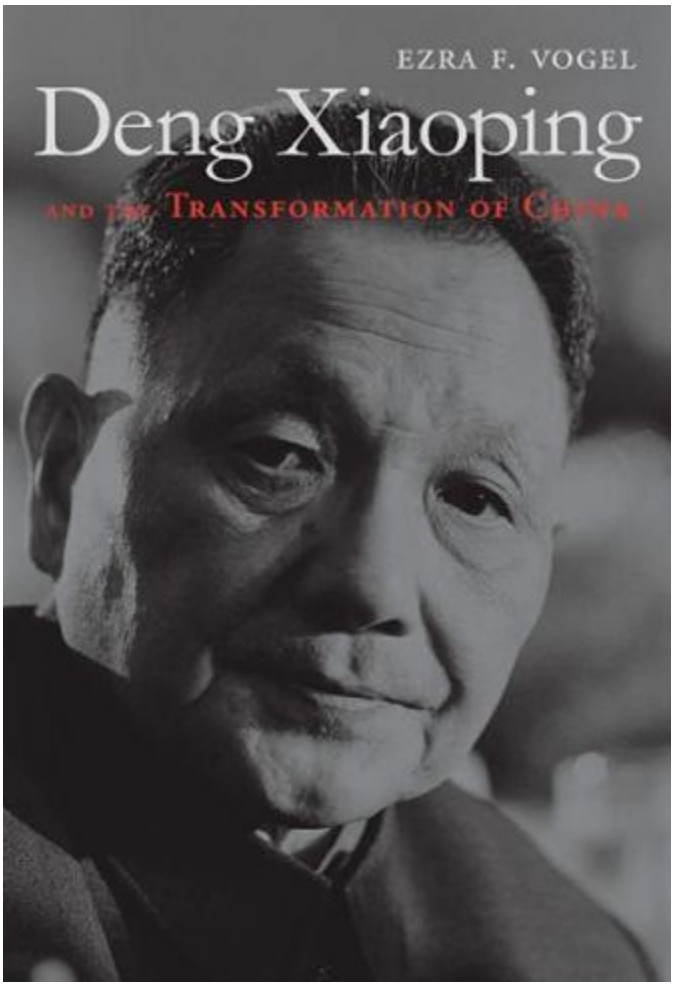

"No leader of the 20th century had made greater impact than Deng Xiaoping," said Ezra F. Vogel, Singapore Management University's (SMU) *Ho Bee Professor in Chinese Economy and Business*.

Under the late Chinese leader's tenure, which lasted from 1978 to 1992, hundreds of millions of Chinese were lifted from poverty. The chaos that was the Cultural Revolution gave way to steadfast economic development that turned China into a key player in the world economy.

Deng was unique in more ways than one. He was not merely a communist party leader or a military hero. What really set him apart was the wealth of international experience he had accumulated over the years, and how he drew on those experiences to shape China's transformation. "Deng has the rare combination of experiences," said Vogel, at the *SMU Ho Bee Professorship Lecture Series*. The 82-year-old *Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences Emeritus* at Harvard University is renowned globally for his scholarship on East Asia.

With his ability to conduct interviews in both Japanese and Mandarin, Vogel has written numerous books on the politics and economies of this region, including the best-selling *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*. More recently, after a decade-long effort, Vogel published *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, a 900-page biography of the Chinese leader.

In the one-hour session at SMU, Vogel described significant events in Deng's life using a series of contextualised photographs. Vogel's main message centred on explaining how Deng's experiences and relationships with political actors outside China shaped his world view, and later, the policies that would transform China.

From France to the UN

Deng had his first overseas experience at the young age of 16. At the time, he was already filled with a strong desire to serve his country and a commitment to nation building. France, widely recognised as a centre of civilisation, was where he chose to work, hoping to gain experience and pursue studies in science and technology.

Deng was not alone in choosing France, and it was not a random choice. During the First World War, instead of sending soldiers to fight on the side of the Allies, China sent some 150,000 young men to work as labourers. The ties which had developed between the two countries continued after the war ended.

While in France, these young Chinese naturally congregated, working and studying together. This young group belonged to influential families back home, and while in France, were exposed to the Marxist ideals of the time.

Referring to a 1924 group photo of Deng and later premier Zhou Enlai, Vogel said: "They came from families good enough to send them there. They were capable of passing exams to go to France. They were the sons of businessmen and small landlords." Other prominent future leaders in the same group included Nie Rongzhen, who would be instrumental in leading the development of China's efforts in science and technology, especially military science, and Li Fuchun, who played a key role in the economy.

In the following two decades or so, the Communists built up their strength and numbers, such that they were able to fight the then-ruling Nationalists. The two groups agreed to a truce to fight the Japanese invasion during the Second World War, and when Japan surrendered, full-blown civil war resumed, before the Communist party claimed victory in 1949.

Deng was not among the top leaders of the party at the onset, in part due to his relative youth. However, Mao Zedong recognised Deng's capabilities and potential, and began grooming him for a top leadership position..

In a 1957 photograph, Deng is pictured with Kliment Voroshilov, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet – USSR's head of state equivalent. In 1960, Deng raised his level of engagement when he met Nikita Krushchev, who, as first secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, held real power.

Naturally, Deng did not devote all his foreign affairs efforts to Russia. He spent time down south too, as captured in a 1960 moment when he met with Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, although later in 1979, Deng would order the invasion of this fellow Communist neighbour over differences with Cambodia.
Deng made his international stage debut in 1974, when he addressed the United Nations. Prior to that event, Premier Zhou Enlai had always been the face of Chinese diplomacy. Zhou was, at the time, battling with cancer and "suffering from political sickness too". Mao thought Zhou would appear too soft, and so that led to the passing of the mantle, said Vogel, referring to a picture showing Zhou sending Deng off to a UN meeting.

Of class struggles and Nobel laureates

Deng did not just focus on foreign political leaders. The pragmatism that would mark Deng's leadership manifested itself in numerous ways. For example, he paid close personal attention to education.

In 1977, just a year after the end of the devastating decade-long Cultural Revolution, when most of the intellectual and academic community were purged and students were affected, Deng directed universities to hold entrance exams for high school students so that classes could resume.

The entry requirements were also different from the earlier Mao years, where those without the right family or class background were at a disadvantage in the post-revolution atmosphere of class struggle. Deng adopted a meritocratic approach to education, citing an urgent need to develop talent for the country's development. "Whoever is able, should be used," said Vogel.

The best Chinese students were also sent abroad so that they could learn about science and technology. Vogel feels that Deng was in a hurry because he was shocked to see how far behind China was during his travels in the earlier years. For example, during a visit to Japan in 1978, he took a ride on the *shinkansen*, or Japan's famous bullet train, and reportedly remarked at how fast the train could travel.

To further enhance the status and importance of science and technology, Deng also met various ethnic Chinese Nobel prizewinners, even though many were not Chinese citizens. The list included Michigan-born Samuel Ting, who, as a MIT physicist, shared the 1976 prize in that subject with Burton Richter of Stanford; Lee Tsung Dao and Yang Chen Ning, who shared the 1957 Nobel, also for physics. While both of them were born in China, they had become American citizens in the early 1960s. Deng also met Lee Yuen Tseh, the Taiwan born chemist who shared the prize in this field with two others in 1986.

China, under Deng, took the big step of putting affairs with neighbouring Japan in order. Some three decades after a bloody invasion by the smaller country, the two reaffirmed "normalised" relations first established back in 1972. In his week-long visit in October 1978, Deng met with Emperor Hirohito. "China and Japan have 2,500 years of history but that was the first time a Chinese leader and a Japanese leader met," pointed out Vogel.

China was also not shy about borrowing what Japan has done successfully. Nippon Steel Corporation's Kimitsu Steel Plant – the world's fourth largest steel mill by volume – hosted a visit by Deng during the trip. Kimitsu would later become the model for China's own national steel works, Baoshan Iron and Steel (later renamed Shanghai Baosteel Group Corporation).

Deng had a Singapore story too. During his visit in November 1978, then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who disliked cigarette smoke, made sure that the meeting place was well ventilated, and that there would be a brand new spittoon for his Chinese visitor. Surprisingly, Deng, a heavy smoker and a habitual user of the spittoon, used neither.

“It is a sign that the two people here have enormous respect for each other. He (Deng) inherited a system that was not working, and he was trying to find one that can,” said Vogel, referring to Singapore’s economic development that was already pulling ahead in just over a decade after separation from Malaysia.

The highpoint of Deng’s international diplomacy – certainly from an American point of view – was his visit to the US in January 1979. The invitation to visit had been extended a month earlier, and was done so “cautiously”. While Deng was effectively running the country, he had yet to be formally given the top post by his party colleagues. Hua Guofeng was still the chairman of the party. When then US ambassador Leonard Woodcock raised the topic, inviting a “top Chinese leader”, without naming anyone specific, Deng’s response was: “I am ready, how about next month?” said Vogel.

The visit included photo shoots on the White House lawn with President Jimmy Carter – where the band played ‘Getting to know you” – to discovering ideological differences and similarities with Tip O’Neil, then Speaker of the House of Representatives. There was also the iconic photo of a beaming Deng, in his Mao suit, donning a rodeo hat while stopping over in Texas.

Orville Schell, a long time China analyst who was covering Deng’s visit as a journalist, described that hat-donning moment as one that had a great impact within China. In one symbolic gesture, Deng indicated that America was no longer the enemy, but a friendly country from which China could learn. Friendly relationships continued with Ronald Reagan, who famously remarked in 1984: “He didn’t seem like a Communist, he seems like a guy I can work with.” Besides Reagan, other Cold War leaders whom Deng dealt with included former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who would later become president of the World Bank, and Margaret Thatcher, with the key result being the agreement on the handing over of Hong Kong back to China.

Tiananmen

Deng’s image on the international stage came under strain following the Tiananmen drama of 1989. The pro-democracy student protests took place just when former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting Beijing to mark the healing of ties between the two Communist giants. For the Chinese government, it was a major embarrassment.

Even as historians today argue over the causes and implications of Tiananmen, Vogel’s assessment of Deng's line of thought was that only be sending in troops could things be put right. “I can understand why people feel angry that Deng sanctioned that horror, and I tried to describe why he did it, without being unnecessarily sympathetic and I tried to present a balanced picture – a point agreed by Andrew Nathan,” said Vogel, referring to his fellow East Asian specialist, who teaches at Columbia University and is the co-author of the *Tiananmen Papers.*

However, even with widespread criticism over the crackdown, Deng was able to draw upon the reservoir of goodwill and ties built over the years – including in America. “Bush Senior had this long, special relationship with Deng,” explained Vogel. One month after the crackdown, Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor, was sent by Bush to explain to Deng that the aim of the post-June 4th sanctions were not to weaken China, but that America had to be seen to take a stand on democracy and human rights. That said, ties between the two countries would continue.

With this message from America, Deng's own message to his government was to keep calm, for China's increasingly manifest vast market potential would soon compel foreign businesses to pressure their governments into lifting the sanctions.

In 1992, after the then 88-year-old Deng resigned from his last formal position as the chairman of the Central Military Commission, he embarked on his famous tour of the southern coastal regions, making the more famous pronouncement, "to get rich is glorious".

The trip reawakened the entrepreneurial instincts of both private small business owners and state-owned behemoths alike, and spurred the country's economy to grow and develop at the breakneck speed that would leave China on a steady path to reassert its political influence internationally. Deng himself would leave the scene and die in February 1997, less than five months before Hong Kong's handover to China.

Was it luck?

China's achievements under Deng seem even more remarkable when contrasted with the rockier road taken by fellow communist giant, the former Soviet Union. Vogel explained that this was because China had several advantages compared to its northern neighbour.

By the 1980s, the USSR was steadily bankrupting itself, as its arms race with America intensified and shifted from earth to space. In contrast, Deng had by then built and maintained a good relationship with America. It was not only unnecessary for China to spend heavily on its armed forces at the expense of other infrastructure investments, China was even able to receive aid from America, Europe and Japan as a result of those of good relations, said Vogel.

Furthermore, many Soviet intellectuals were leaving their country. The Chinese, however, often felt a strong sense of belonging and many returned to China after having studied and worked abroad.

Of course, leadership played the deciding role. "Gorbachev changed politics first, and their political structure was not as strong," said Vogel. While lauded by the West for reforming the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was unable to survive his internal political opponents. By contrast, China's political leadership was strong enough to bring about big changes while maintaining their hold on power.

A great deal of credit goes to Deng. "He not only has the leadership, but he also has diverse experience, which gave him enormous authority. He was like a founder of the company, and therefore, he has the power to do things within the company and shape changes," said Vogel.

Towards the end of his lecture, Vogel was asked if all the credit given to Deng was fully deserved, for China's economy in 1978, when he took over, was in such a bad shape that things could only get better. In other words, was Deng merely lucky?

"Many countries in 1978 were also in a bad shape, many governments were muddling along. There were lots of opportunities, lots of muddling along. You can't say that just because they are in a bad shape, then they will turn out fine. It takes a lot of work and it takes a lot of leadership," said Vogel.